



Ch'an Newsletter

No. 66 June, 1988

Chinese Ch'an and Its Relevance in North America Today

A lecture given by Master Sheng-yen at the University of Toronto on May 7, 1988.

Our topic addresses the relevance of Chinese Ch'an for people living in North America. The talk will be divided into four sections:

- I) What is life like in North America?
- II) What is Ch'an?
- III) What is Chinese Ch'an?
- IV) Do North Americans need Chinese Ch'an?

(I)

What is life like in North America? I'm not a native of North America, but after being here for several years I have made certain observations. People always talk about the tension and the hectic pace of life in North America, and they sometimes blame it on the high level of development of industry, commerce, science and technology. These things have influenced our lives in ways that make it difficult not to be tense. Also, North America is unique in that it is a melting pot of cultures, customs and nationalities.

Modern people are bombarded with conceptual, intellectual knowledge. All the latest ideas and technology seem to pour into North America. The incessant input of new things creates confusion in our minds. It is difficult to know what to choose, what to follow.

North American life is materially rich, but spiritually decadent. People have a feeling of insecurity and alienation. The Chinese have a saying about married couples: "Though they sleep on the same bed, they dream different dreams." Even in tightly-knit families, many people lack a feeling of security. How much more is the alienation that we may feel among all of the cultures that make up North America?

I'm sorry if I have emphasized only the negative side of North American life. There is a positive side. If there weren't, then why would people from virtually every

place on Earth long to come here in order to find happiness and fulfill their dreams? To millions of people in the world, North America is an ideal place, a heaven of sorts, a place with endless opportunity.

Is North America the heaven many think it is? In the material sense, perhaps so, when you compare it to most other countries. But how do people feel who already live here? I see that many of you are not so sure that this place is heaven.

In fact, many people think life in North America is a sort a cruel punishment from God. Although they have many diversions and luxuries, people feel God has lifted them only half way to heaven, and they are stuck in mid-air, in a place where they are blown this way and that by a constant wind of insecurity. They feel like homeless spirits roaming aimlessly with no roots. Because they are so busy, many do not even notice the sorry state that they're in, and they live in a spiritual vacuum. They work and play at a frenetic pace day and night, but they have no real purpose. They are not masters of their own lives.

Whether or not this is an accurate picture of North American life depends on your point of view. If the way I've depicted life here has an element of truth in it, then I think we can say Ch'an is necessary in North America. It is only when you realize that you have problems that Ch'an is needed. If you do not have problems, then Ch'an is not applicable. And if there weren't any problems worth solving, it would be meaningless to consider the relevance of Ch'an in North America.

(II)

What is Ch'an? I will discuss this in three sub-sections:

- 1) Ch'an is a method of spiritual practice.
- 2) Ch'an is an inexplicable type of wisdom.
- 3) Ch'an is all phenomena. There is nothing which it is not, and there is no place where it is not.

1. Methods of meditation exist in Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as in other religious traditions. Although both Indian and Ch'an masters teach methods of meditation, the two traditions emphasize different things. Ch'an Buddhism derives from Dhyana Buddhism, which began in India long before Buddhism ever entered China. The advanced meditation techniques of Dhyana were studied and practiced avidly by Chinese.

Ch'an or Dhyana applies to and is an important part of the spiritual training of many different Indian religions: Hinduism, the religion of India before the rise of Buddhism, and Buddhism itself. An important part of yoga is mental discipline, and

there are several concrete methods which are used in Ch'an that help to concentrate the mind. Such methods include counting breaths, concentrating on the breath, meditating on certain parts of the body, focusing the mind on specific sounds, etc.

The purpose of these methods is to take the mind from a scattered condition, one filled with vexation and constraint, to a state of focused one-mindedness, and then further, to a point where the external and internal become one.

Vexations are caused by scattered thoughts, which arise from our inability to concentrate and focus the mind. Indian traditions have taught ways to emancipate people from this unsatisfactory condition through the practice of meditation.

The highest teachings of Ch'an do not depend upon and indeed go beyond the Indian techniques of yoga and mental concentration. However, for the beginning Ch'an practitioner, these basic concrete methods of mental discipline are often necessary.

We find instructions for such methods in the teachings of the patriarchs. Fourth Patriarch Tao-hsin (580-651 A.D.) explained a method in *The Essential Practical Methods for Purifying the Mind*. Tao-hsin recommends that you begin to practice Ch'an by examining the mind. He says that you should sit by yourself in a quiet place, straighten your body, loosen your clothing so you are not restricted, let your body and nerves and mind relax, massage yourself several times, and allow your body and mind to come into harmony.

He then describes the level of awareness you can reach using this method. First, the experience of both inner and outer environments become empty and pure. You move through deepening levels of concentration to a point where even the thought of concentrating will be absent from your mind. Eventually you transcend all mental realms of experience to a total unification of inner and outer environments, where all distinctions dissolve. That level is called nirvana.

A second example comes from Fifth Patriarch Hung-jen (602-675). In an essay called *Discussing the Spiritual Practice of Cultivating the Mind*, his words are similar to Tao-hsin's. He says that if you are beginning to practice Ch'an, you should practice according to what was written in the *Sutra of the Meditation on Amitabha Buddha*. It is a Pure Land sutra which discusses infinite life. The teachings say to sit up straight, close your mouth and focus your eyes in front of you. You can imagine the sun bathing you with its rays. You must learn to hold firmly to True Mind. The True Mind is the unmoving mind. Do not let your thoughts dwell or stagnate on any one thing.

Hung-jen also talks about the harmonious regulation of breathing. Do not let your breathing be irregular – sometimes coarse, sometimes fine and slow – because that can cause illness. Other examples of basic meditation methods come from a Sung Dynasty (eleventh century) monk named Chang-lu Tsung-tsi, as well as from

Dogen (1200-1252), the great Japanese master and founder of the Japanese Soto Zen sect.

The techniques of Dhyana – the Indian meditation methods that lead to samadhi – were certainly accepted and used in China. But they were used primarily by beginners. If a person is experienced and has a long history of meditation practice, he can dispense with such techniques. Ch'an itself is not limited to concentration. Ch'an is a goal which can be reached through special methods that have nothing to do with concentration. This leads us to the second definition of Ch'an.

2. Ch'an is inexplicable wisdom. Ch'an cannot be expressed or described in words, nor can it be imagined or grasped by the conceptual mind. Anything that can be expressed in language, no matter how wonderful, is not Ch'an. The limitations of language is illustrated in an anecdote involving Master Pai-chang Huai-hai (720-814). One day he went to the lecture platform in the temple to give a talk to his monks, and he asked them to say something to him without using their mouths. One forward monk named Kuei-shan replied, "Rather than have us speak the truth, why don't you speak it instead."

A second example comes from the *Platform Sutra*, which recounts the biography and teachings of the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng. The Fifth Patriarch had given the robe and bowl to Hui-neng. This signified that Hui-neng was to be the next patriarch. Other monks vied for the robe and bowl because they viewed it as a symbol of power and prestige rather than as a spiritual affirmation bestowed by the teacher. Hui-neng fled to the mountains in fear of those who wanted to take his robe and bowl. One of his Dharma brothers from the temple, who was a former army general of considerable power and will, caught up with him. Hui-neng placed the robe and bowl on the ground and said, "Take them. I do not want to fight."

The Dharma brother answered, "I did not come for the robe and bowl. I came for the Dharma." At that moment, Hui-neng gave his first teaching as the Sixth Patriarch. He said, "Not thinking of good and not thinking of evil, who is it that stands before me?"

A third example comes from Pai-chang. He said that the true wisdom of Buddha is attained only when you free yourself from all restrictions: all conceptions of good and evil or purity and impurity, any meditative technique or other worldly method, any idea of spiritual blessings or merit. If you transcend this, you will achieve the wisdom of the Buddha.

3. Ch'an is all phenomena. There is nothing that it is not, and there is no place where it cannot be found. I said Ch'an transcends all concepts, that it cannot be grasped or defined. However, Ch'an excludes nothing, so perhaps there are ways of suggesting Ch'an in speech. The first example comes from Chao-chou (778-897).

One day a monk studying in the temple came to Chao-chou and said, "I am confused. I would like the Master to give me some direction."

Master Chao-chou answered, "Did you eat your porridge yet?"

"Yes, I have."

"Well then, go and wash your bowl." After that statement, the monk had an enlightenment experience. If, after you drank milk, I told you to wash your glass, do you think you would experience enlightenment? We must remember the background of such stories. This monk had a long period of intense practice. Because his mind was straight forward and fresh, Chao-chou's words were enough to trigger an experience. Thus, anything we say or do can be considered to be Ch'an. Nothing we do is outside of Ch'an.

There is another famous story about Chao-chou. A monk asked, "What is Ch'an?"

Chao-chou replied, "When you're hungry, eat; when you're tired, sleep; when you have to shit, shit."

The monk said, "Everyone does that. Does that mean everyone is in a Ch'an state?"

Chao-chou asked, "When you're eating, are you doing so with a one-pointed mind? When you are sleeping, aren't you elsewhere, off in a dream?"

Another monk said to Chao-chou, "All the multitudes of dharmas return to one. Where does the one return to?" Returning the multitudes of dharmas to one refers to concentrating the scattered mind until the inner is one with the outer. It is similar to the religious concept of everything returning to God, or the question of how multiplicity and unity are related?

Chao-chou answered, "When I was in the village, I had a cloth robe made for me that weighs seven pounds." Chao-chou was asked an abstract question, and he answered with a prosaic reply, one that seemingly bore no relationship to the question. Actually, his answer was simple and direct. He had just returned from the village with a new robe, and he was happy. No matter what anyone had asked him, he would have answered, "I just had this beautiful robe made for me."

You do not have to use philosophical concepts to inquire into truth. The question – "If all things return to one, where does the one return to?" – is not really an important matter. Actually, even the most brilliant philosopher has to eat, sleep and shit, as does the simplest of unskilled laborers. Why must the ultimate truths be limited only to the brilliant? It's not that Ch'an is opposed to philosophical inquiry, it's just that we don't have to use sophisticated and profound thoughts in order to seek and achieve ultimate truth. The ultimate truth is right before us and all around us all the time in every moment of our lives.

Another monk asked Chao-chou, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West?"

In the courtyard outside the temple seeds were falling from a cypress tree. Chao-chou pointed to the tree and said, "The seeds of the tree in the garden." The monk asked about the essential teachings of Ch'an, and he was answered with a simple, seemingly non-related reply about a tree that stood right before him.

The monk wasn't satisfied with the answer, and he said, "Don't answer my serious questions by talking about the landscape!"

Chao-chou answered, "I'm not talking about the landscape."

The monk then asked the same question. Chao-chou gave him the same answer.

This is a well known kung-an in Ch'an. The meaning is simple. At that moment, Chao-chou looked out the window and saw the seeds falling from the cypress tree, so he said, "That is the real meaning of what Bodhidharma brought from the West." If Chao-chou had been watching an old flea-bitten dog shitting, he would have given that answer.

Yet another monk asked Chao-chou, "What is the Buddha?"

Chao-chou replied, "He's in the Buddha hall."

The monk answered, "No, that's a clay statue."

Chao-chou admitted, "You're right."

So the monk asked again, "Then what is the Buddha?"

Chao-chou said, "He's in the Buddha hall." If a dog had walked in front of him, he probably would have said, "The dog is the Buddha."

Essentially, whatever you see, hear, sense, or do is Ch'an. But nothing in itself represents the whole of Ch'an. If you see something at a certain time, you can say that that is Ch'an, but it will never be ultimate, permanent reality.

(to be continued)

Triple Celebration

Our triple celebration was held on May 22, 1988. It commemorated the Buddha's Birthday, the tenth anniversary of Ch'an Center and the formal opening of the new center. Our anticipation of three hundred guests proved to be wrong, as more than five hundred guests joined in the celebration and feast. We were fortunate to have as our special guests, The Right Reverend Duan Jin, Rev. Guang Fan and Rev. Chuan Yin from the Philippines, and Rev. Jen Jin from New Jersey. People came from as far away as Taiwan, Texas, Iowa and Massachusetts.

With Shih-fu presiding, the ceremony began at 10:00 a.m. The participants took part in chanting, bathing the Buddha and receiving the Three Jewels. Afterward, special thanks were given to eighteen people who donated the most money to the Building Fund for the new center. Shih-fu awarded them with framed prints of his personal calligraphy. The recipients were delighted, especially when they discovered that Shih-fu's calligraphy was auctioned for \$ 1,000 to \$ 3,500 at the last fund drive for the foundation of Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Studies in Taiwan.

Following the awards ceremony was an extra-special luncheon, a delicious feast prepared by twenty or so members of our congregation. There were more than thirty dishes and desserts, and a five-foot high, four-layer cake, which more than satisfied all our guests.

The "Lucky Grab Bag" followed lunch, and everyone received a gift from the pool of gifts brought by most who attended. Then the lights were dimmed, and a special video was shown. *The Gathering of Rivers and Clouds*, an hour-long documentary produced in Taiwan, follows Shih-fu's activities over a period of fifteen days. Most of us did not realize how hard he works, and how busy he is, until we watched this video. It was a heart-felt revelation.

The celebration ended on a cheerful note when Shih-fu gave away all the fruit, candy and flowers, for participants to take home and share with families and friends.

We already overheard a comment: "The new center is getting too small!"

Retreat

Thirty-three people participated in the May retreat, the largest number we've ever had. The July retreat will run from July 1 to July 8. Thirty-two people have registered, and a few had to be turned away. It is difficult keeping to the thirty person limit we set for retreats, as we receive so many applications. Now that Shih-fu's Ch'an retreats in Taiwan are closed to the public, people come from Taiwan

just to participate in our retreats. We are very fortunate, and deeply thankful, that Shih-fu has come to New York to teach Buddhadharma.

Members Meeting

July 10 is our annual Members Meeting. Everyone is welcome to attend. We will report on all the activities of the past year, as well as plans for the coming year. Shih-fu leaves New York July 10, immediately after regular Sunday activities.

Activity Schedule

In Shih-fu's absence, the following activities are scheduled:

Sunday lecture series by **Professor Li**: July 17, 23, August 14, 21, September 11, 18

Sunday lecture series by **Rev. Jen Jin**: August 7, 28, September 4, 25, October 2, 9, 16

One-day Meditation: August 5-6, September 2-3, October 7-8

One-day Recitation of Buddha's Name: July 16, August 20, September 17, October 15

Annual Picnic

Our annual picnic is scheduled for July 31, 1988. Everyone is welcome. Please contact the center for details.

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